

Gas and Glory Fuel Race for the North Pole

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Region: [Canada](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

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The race for the North Pole is on again, and this time there's more at stake than pride at seeing a national flag fluttering on the icecap: There's oil and gas too.

Russia is one of a handful of nations vying to lay claim to the vast untapped resources of the Arctic, and the competition — like the region itself — is likely to heat up as global warming and new technology make previously undreamed-of exploration feasible.

Two deep-sea submersibles made a test dive in polar waters Sunday ahead of a mission to be the first to reach the seabed.

It took an hour for Mir-1 and Mir-2, each carrying one pilot, to reach the seabed at a depth of 1,311 meters, 87 kilometers north of Russia's northernmost archipelago, Franz Josef Land in the Barents Sea, Itar-Tass reported.

"It was the first time a submersible had worked under the icecap and it proved they can do this," Anatoly Sagalevich, the pilot of Mir-1 was quoted as saying by Itar-Tass as he left the sub.

As the Arctic icecap thins as a result of global warming, a race is looming to claim ownership of the rich energy resources under the North Pole.

The mission plans to drop a meter-tall, titanium Russian tricolor on the exact spot under the pole to stake a symbolic claim to it and large chunks of Arctic territory for Russia, already the world's largest country.

Moscow is seeking to put forward a legal claim to a United Nations commission in 2009 — 100 years after the first explorers claimed to have reached the pole by sled and husky.

"We are going to be the first to put a flag there, a Russian flag," expedition leader Artur Chilingarov, 68, told a televised news conference before setting off from the northern port of Murmansk last week.

"The Arctic is ours and we should demonstrate our presence," said Chilingarov, a Duma deputy speaker who heads the country's Association of Polar Explorers.

Following behind a nuclear-powered icebreaker, the latest deep-sea maneuvers are part of a larger scientific mission to investigate the geology of the under-explored territory. Despite engine trouble delaying the mission temporarily early last Thursday, all seemed back on course later in the day, reporters on board the convoy said.

"We must remind the whole world that Russia is a great polar and scientific power," said

Duma Deputy Vladimir Gruzdev, Chilingarov's fellow submariner on the trip.

The latest expedition is being widely seen as part of the protracted international scramble for control of the Arctic region.

According to some estimates, the Arctic region could hold up to one-quarter of the earth's remaining untapped oil and gas reserves.

Uppermost in the current debate are the rights to the disputed Lomonosov Ridge, a thin underwater crust that crosses the Arctic Ocean over the pole and stretches from Russia to a point between Greenland and Canada. Estimates suggest that the ridge could contain somewhere in the region of 10 billion barrels of oil.

Currently no one country has exclusive jurisdiction over the Arctic. Under a 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Seas, five Arctic nations — Russia, the United States, Canada, Norway and Denmark — each control a 200-mile (320-kilometer) economic zone beyond their actual borders. This means that no one country controls the pole.

The Jamaica-based International Seabed Authority is in charge of overseeing such international waters.

For Russia, or any other country, to expand its territory in the region, it must prove that the disputed territories are linked to the mainland as part of the same continental shelf.

In 2001, the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf rejected claims that the Lomonosov Ridge belonged to Russia, demanding more conclusive scientific proof.

"The UN law of the sea has come to a head in the last few years and all the countries have started competing and claiming things for themselves," said Richard Scott, a research geologist working on a Cambridge University study of the Arctic shelf.

"The difficulty we have in the Arctic Ocean is that there are a lot of ridges and it is not clear whether they are attached to the continental shelves," Scott said. "The necessary data is missing at the moment. We have some information, but not very good information."

Now it seems Moscow is willing to make more money available for Arctic research, in a bid to bolster its case.

"Funding of polar expeditions and large Arctic projects, including a scientific proof as to the external boundary of the Russian Arctic shelf, is growing each year," Chilingarov told the Murmansk news conference, Itar-Tass reported.

A spokeswoman for Chilingarov on Wednesday said he was unreachable for further comment.

Recently another government-funded expedition of 50 scientists spent 45 days scouring the area around the Lomonosov Ridge in an attempt to collate data to back up Russian claims of ownership.

"We have answered all the questions that the UN commission had placed before us," said Viktor Poselov, the leader of that mission, who is deputy head of the Natural Resources

Ministry's Institute of World Ocean Geology and Mineral Resources.

Russia plans to submit a renewed claim to Arctic territory when the UN Commission meets in 2009, Poselov said.

Asked whether the group's findings meant that the North Pole belonged to Russia, Poselov said, "The [ownership of the] North Pole is not our question, it is a question for the Foreign Ministry to decide. ... It is a question for the UN."

Any moves to extend Russia's boundaries are not about the potential hydrocarbon bonanza in the region, Poselov insisted.

"Just like any other state Russia wants its borders to be clarified legally," he said, citing a range of other countries that are lodging territorial claims.

Both Canada and Denmark also lay claim to the Lomonosov Ridge, having asserted previously that it is connected both to Canadian territory and to Greenland.

Trine Dahl-Jensen, a researcher at the government-funded Geological Survey for Denmark and Greenland, said in a telephone interview from Copenhagen that investigations are currently ongoing into Denmark's claims to the ridge.

Denmark and Canada sent out a large joint expedition last spring, Dahl-Jensen said. Denmark has until 2014 to put forward its claims to any additional territory, she said.

Earlier this month Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced plans to beef up the country's presence in the region by splashing out over \$7 billion on a fleet of purpose-built Arctic patrol ships, a report on his web site said.

"Canada has a choice when it comes to defending our sovereignty over the Arctic. We either use it or lose it. And make no mistake, this government intends to use it," Harper said in British Columbia.

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